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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CASABLANCA 001330

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SUBJECT: SPECIAL ENVOY RICKMAN MEETS WITH JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADERS IN CASABLANCA

Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4  
(b), (d).

11. (C) Summary: During a recent visit to Casablanca, the Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, Gregg Rickman, met with leading members of Morocco's Jewish community to discuss various topics of concern. Candid conversations highlighted the community's anxiety over possible political gains by the Islamists in the 2007 elections. In addition, community leaders voiced their disapproval of perceived U.S. support for the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO) and the Party of Justice and Development (PJD). Our interlocutors were highly critical of both the U.S.' "invitation" to JCO's Nadia Yasmine and the IRI poll, carried out earlier this year, predicting a potentially strong showing for the PJD in the elections. When the conversation turned to Jewish-Muslim relations, Rickman proposed using Morocco as an interfaith model for the greater Middle East. Community leaders expressed their discomfort with the initiative, which might raise their profile, and indicated we should leave well enough alone and not "rock the boat." End Summary.

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The Islamists are Coming  
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12. (C) During a recent visit to Morocco's financial and business capital, Gregg Rickman, Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, made the most out of his limited time by meeting with the leading members of the country's Jewish community to discuss their concerns. During the five-hour stop Rickman visited the city's Jewish Museum, met with the country's Chief Rabi, and dined with three community leaders. Chief among the community's concerns was the anxiety felt by many leaders of the community regarding the potential gains of the Islamists and the upcoming elections. According to Simon Levy, curator of the only Jewish museum in the Arab world, "We (Jews) have real enemies in Morocco" relating his concern over a perceived threat from the Islamists.

13. (C) According to Serge Berdugo, leader of Morocco's Jewish community and the King's Ambassador-at-large, the PJD's moderate pitch is merely a facade. He dismissed the efforts made by the group to reach out to his community after the May 13 bombings, which struck four Jewish targets, as a hollow publicity stunt. He insinuated that the PJD has connections to other less "reasonable" Islamist organizations and speculated that the party may have a hidden agenda. Berdugo cautioned that if the PJD gain power there will be problems for the Jews and others as well, indicating moderate Muslims might face difficulties. According to Berdugo "An unstable Morocco would be the worst in the whole Middle East. You will be surprised."

14. (C) The representatives of the community, lead by Berdugo, went on to criticize the U.S.' "invitation" to Nadia Yasine, daughter of JCO leader Sheikh Abdesalam Yasine, to visit the U.S. We pointed out that Yasine's invitation came from private universities and organizations and was not sponsored by the USG. The leaders retorted that simply issuing a visa and allowing her to visit the U.S. gave the appearance of support by the USG and lent credibility to her extremist organization, legitimizing their efforts and "erasing what they are."

15. (C) As we have heard from other Moroccan contacts, the community representatives were also unhappy with IRI's polling results and accused the U.S. of supporting the PJD by "predicting" a majority of Moroccans would vote for the party in the 2007 elections. Berdugo dismissed our efforts to clarify the often-misunderstood results commenting that what matters is people's perception of the poll, not the details or the process.

16. (C) Corruption and the absolute power of the king were also topics addressed throughout the visit. Berdugo and Levy saw the recent crackdown on corruption within political parties as a possible threat to the country's immediate stability. According to the community leaders, the crackdown only serves to call attention to the fact that the Islamist Party is the only "honest" party giving more power to the Islamists and threatening Morocco's democracy movement. Berdugo opined that, "Absolute power of the King is the only way to democracy and enforced democracy is the only way for Morocco."

17. (C) Berdugo is clearly hedging his bets in the face of the rising popularity of the PJD. Having expressed strong criticism earlier about PJD motives and goals, he expressed confidence that, as long as the King is in control, even an Islamist victory would not upset the system. "I talk to them everyday" Berdugo said, explaining that he believes that the PJD understand that they need to operate within

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certain parameter set by the palace.

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Morocco as Model  
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18. (C) Turning to Morocco's reputation for religious tolerance, Rickman proposed holding Morocco up as a model for the Arab world. With its history of acceptance of the Jewish community, Rickman stated, Morocco's arrangement could serve as a framework for other countries. While all agreed that the system works in Morocco, the community leaders expressed anxiety at the prospect of using the country as a model. It was evident that while the Jewish community is comfortable with their situation they are equally uncomfortable with the idea of disturbing the status quo. Clearly, this community realizes it is shrinking due to natural attrition, and acknowledges many of its youth are leaving to seek educational and economic opportunities abroad. There is natural concern that close scrutiny and increased exposure might reveal or create a problem, which could accelerate that process.

19. (C) In addressing the possibility of USG assistance for projects within the community, the leaders politely rejected the idea of outside efforts to help with the community's campaign to include the Moroccan-Jewish history in Moroccan textbooks. Additionally, they flatly refused even to consider a suggestion about building monuments memorializing wartime camps in Morocco, arguably in order to maintain their less than prominent profile.

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Comment  
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110. (C) Comment: The Moroccan Jewish community was very eager to meet with the Special Envoy while he was in Casablanca. Moreover, they were decidedly candid in their comments about the community's situation in the country and their feelings towards the Islamists, perceived U.S. policy, and related issues. They clearly see the protection of the King as necessary to their current and future security and stability. Too much democracy, too quickly, makes them

uncomfortable. The group's concerns regarding the growing popularity of Islamists throughout the country are shared by Casablanca's business community, intellectuals, and reformists. End Comment

Greene